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THE BOYHOOD OF JOSEPH.

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ORDINARILY the social customs of the ancient Orient gave little scope for love and romance. Marriage was so prevailingly a matter of convenience and policy that the few exceptions stand out from the dark background in striking relief. To understand the character and early history of Joseph ben Jacob it is necessary to go back to a scene beside a well not far from the Mesopotamian town of Haran. The age is the patriarchal; the stage of civilization, the nomadic; the hour, midday. Near the well, which is covered with a huge stone to protect it from the hot eastern sun, are three flocks of sheep, one of them approaching from a short distance, driven by a graceful, sunbrowned daughter of the East. Already the group of shepherds lounging beside the well has been joined by a youth whose accent and bearing indicate that he is a stranger. Pleasantly he accosts them, inquiring whence they come; and, when he finds that they are from Haran, he eagerly adds: "Do you know Laban, the son of Nahor?" Well do they know him. In fact, the young girl approaching, driving the flock, is his daughter Rachel. One intent gaze at the stately maiden, whose face was lighted and beautified by those flashing eyes which proclaimed the charm, the passion, and the ambition within, called forth from the homesick stranger that chivalry—so rare in his age, and yet the omnipresent herald of a true love. Ardent lover that he was, he had no patience with the shepherds who, in accordance with their custom, would keep this fair queen waiting until all the flocks were collected. Genuine love ever seeks expression in deeds, and so, as soon as Rachel stood beside the well, the strong arms of the stranger had rolled away the huge stone. Like many modern impetuous lovers, he forthwith claimed a kiss as

his reward. The biblical narrative does not suggest that the maiden resisted. The sudden transition from the lot of a homesick wanderer to that of an accepted lover so affected the passionate son of the East that he burst out into weeping. His tears were tears of joy, however, for the stranger was Jacob, and the fair Rachel his cousin.

True love in the past, as in the present, encountered obstacles ; but after repeated disappointments and long years of faithful waiting they were wedded. The first offspring resulting from that union was a boy to whom they gave the name of Joseph. Thus the heritage of love, which he enjoyed from his birth, gave him an advantage enjoyed by few in that ancient oriental world where genuine and deep affections between father and mother were rare. The home at Haran, however, into which the little Joseph was born, was not altogether one of peace and happiness. Envy and rivalry, the ever present attendants of polygamy, separated the children of Jacob's large family ; while an abnormally developed sharpness in dealing, which was the greatest fault in the character of both Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, constantly kept the relations between them highly strained. Indeed, so strained did they in time become that soon after the birth of Joseph, Jacob, improving a favorable opportunity, collected his family and flocks, and fled westward. Although he was overtaken in the east Jordan uplands of Gilead by the incensed Laban, the same Providence which had guarded him hitherto delivered him from his kinsman, and he pursued his way to Hebron, stopping for a time among the verdant pasture lands of central Canaan. The scene of Joseph's boyhood, therefore, was in the neighborhood of Hebron. To the stranger who first gazes upon the hills and valleys which surround this ancient city it seems the most uninviting spot in all Canaan. The gray limestone rocks occupy more than half of the surface and give the impression at a distance of covering the ground completely. The agricultural Canaanites, who entered the land long before the clan of Abraham migrated westward, regarded it as so inferior to the plains of the north that they had left it unoccupied. To nomads, however, it appealed strongly, because it supplied the

two necessities for their existence, water and pasturage. The springs of Hebron had not their equal in all the south country, while in the valleys and between the rocks grew the rich, short grass, which the sheep and cattle snatch up eagerly. The ruggedness of the scenery also appealed to the nomadic instincts. On the south they could continue in touch with the wanderers of the desert; while on the east the Dead Sea, surrounded by barren, rounded hills, increased the wildness and isolation of the situation. The traveler who mounts from the Philistine plain, through a narrow, frowning gorge, to the highlands of Judah naturally regards Hebron as a storm-swept eagles' nest perched on the heights. Its barrenness, its wildness, its isolation, all attracted the Bene Abraham, and in turn entered into their very character. Rough, rude men they were, little affected by the Canaanitish civilization, already hoary and decaying, with which they came into contact in certain parts of the land.

Ungovernable in their passions, impatient of restraint or opposition, they lived most happily when separated from each other and their neighbors by many broad acres. The hills and valleys about Hebron proving insufficient for themselves and their flocks, they scattered northward, finding on the rich plains of central Canaan a luxuriant pasturage, which attracted and held them.

Hence the boy Joseph probably saw little of his older brothers, and for the same reason saw more of his father, Jacob. The fact that Joseph was the child of his advanced years, and the eldest son of his favorite wife, gave the boy the first place in the paternal heart. The death of Rachel, which occurred while Joseph was still a small child, deprived him of a mother's care, and at the same time deepened his father's love for him. It was not strange, therefore, that the partiality which Jacob constantly showed toward the mother was transferred to the son.

The child grew up at the patriarchal home near Hebron without restraint, and without that close companionship of equals which is essential to the normal development of every boy. He was surrounded only by servants, from whom, as his father's favorite, he could command absolute obedience, and

consequently failed to gain that true perspective which was necessary to put him in the right relations with his brothers. If their all too well-founded jealousy of him had not raised a wall of separation, there would still have been little in common between their rude, roving natures and that of the thoughtful, oft-times lonesome lad, who spent his childhood among the wild hills of southern Judah. If his father spoiled him, he nevertheless imparted to him the ambitions of his family, and that religious heritage, the faith in Jehovah, which alone distinguished the Benê Abraham from the thousands of wandering clans, who were struggling for home and for subsistence in that seething Semitic world.

A patriarch of old, as a king like David or an Arab sheik of today, named his successor, and the choice was usually regarded by the clan. That Jacob would choose his beloved Joseph, the eldest son of his favorite wife, was a foregone conclusion. Thus the older brothers seem to have reasoned. Perhaps the fond father may have whispered it into Joseph's ear. That may have been the significance of the elaborate robe with which his father clad him, and account for the rage which is kindled in the minds of his brothers. Certainly the position which he held in his parent's heart suggested it, and the boy understood. Thus the sense of responsibility, as well as the fact that his father was his chief companion, developed him in certain ways beyond his years.

Dreams, which frequently throw into clear relief the ideas latent in the awakened consciousness and which were universally regarded by antiquity as a message from the Deity, came to him. At one time he dreamed that he was gathering sheaves in the field with his brothers, when lo! his sheaf arose and stood upright, while their sheaves came and bowed before his. The significance of the dream was plainly obvious.

At another time he dreamed that the sun and moon and eleven stars made obeisance to him. Then in his simplicity he told these dreams to his brothers, whose feelings can easily be imagined. They were still further irritated by his action on another occasion. At the age of seventeen, while spending a

few days with them as they were feeding their flocks, he observed certain things which did not seem to him to be right, and accordingly reported them to his father. Such action was not calculated to engender that fraternal affection of which there was a sore need in the heterogeneous family of Jacob. "A tell-tale" they undoubtedly called him, and not without foundation.

We are, none of us, quite sure that we would have enjoyed being one of Joseph's elder brothers. An uncomfortable boy to get along with he certainly was; but the more thoughtful student of his character would be loth to admit that he was a hypocrite. What his brothers must have regarded as arrogant hypocrisy was due primarily to his intense earnestness and simplicity. Claims of superiority in so young a lad seemed absurd; but we must recognize the fact that he was honest in making them. The readiness with which he recounted his dreams to his brothers reveals not only his lack of tact, but also his genuineness. If he had been a hypocrite he would have been less naïve.

Undoubtedly the conduct of his brothers was by no means perfect. A boy with a lower ideal and more worldly wise would not have reported their misdemeanors. Without question his dreams unpleasantly reveal his ambitions; but his ambitions to excel his brothers, when we know what they were, command our admiration rather than disapproval. The narrative, therefore, introduces us to an inexperienced lad, whose development in many ways has been abnormal. At the stage of advancement in which we are studying him he is not altogether attractive; but underneath are the foundations of a strong character. His ideal was high, his sense of duty strong and well developed, his faith in Jehovah firm, and his ambitions as noble as they were unbounded. When the supreme test came, one might be sure that he would not be found wanting, but that he would come forth from the furnace of affliction refined of that dross in his character which, at the age of seventeen, concealed the true gold.

The test came soon, as it always does to those who need it. The jealousy and hatred which his brothers felt towards him at last reached a climax. Strangely enough, his father seems to

have remained in complete ignorance of their feeling. This fact suggests how little he saw of them, and how completely Jacob's ardent love for his favorite blinded him to facts. Joseph himself in his simplicity does not seem to have entertained a single suspicion. Hence, when Jacob wished to send a message to his elder sons, who were with their flocks near Shechem, it was Joseph whom he sent. Following the shepherd instincts, the brothers had driven their flocks up through the rich, broad valleys of Ephraim to the vicinity of Dothan, lying almost on the borders of the great plain of Esdraelon. As they see the lad in the distance, coming up the long, wide valley, they recognize at once his tunic from its rich colors, so dear to the oriental eye, yet so hateful to them. As the unsuspecting Joseph approached, like a red flag it waved before them, inciting them to deeds of bloodshed. "Let us slay this 'interpreter' (literally 'master') of dreams," they cry. Reuben, feeling the responsibility of the oldest son, is able only to deter them from carrying their threat into immediate execution by appealing to the deep-seated Semitic antipathy to shedding blood, and by suggesting that they cast him into a cistern near at hand, hoping thereby to be able to release him later. The narrative does not suggest that Joseph made any resistance. Probably he was struck dumb with astonishment, for in his simple innocence he seems to have been quite unaware of the hatred which his brothers entertained toward him. Stripped of his princely robe, cast by his own kinsmen into a well to die, the young Joseph was awakened as suddenly as cruelly to the darker realities of life. In the school of trial and suffering, which he then entered, he was to learn those lessons which are absolutely necessary to make a well-developed man.

The wandering Arabian tribes known as the Midianites and Ishmaelites rarely brought to the Hebrews anything but disaster and loss; but to Joseph they proved saviors. While his brothers are eating their coarse shepherd meal near the place of his confinement, a band of these ancient gypsies, laden with spices and other products of the fertile heights of Gilead, came along the road which ran near Dothan through the valleys of

northern Ephraim to join the great highway leading to Egypt. To the brethren the presence of these traders suggested a happy solution of the question of how to dispose of their captive without soiling their hands with his blood. Irresponsible and unprincipled as their Bohemian brothers today, the Ishmaelites were quite ready to venture to purchase without question the stalwart youth, who was forthwith drawn up from the well. Twenty pieces of silver, the regular price of a bond servant in that old Semitic world where the barter of human beings was by no means uncommon, were duly counted out, and the all-but-spoiled favorite son of Jacob was borne off as a slave to the valley of the Nile. Reuben, who had been absent during the transaction, is forced to become a party to the crime. The crafty brothers found no difficulty in devising a plan to conceal their perfidy. Joseph's many-colored robe was dipped in the blood of a kid and brought to their aged father with a sinister tale of finding it and of wondering to whom it belonged. Jacob, so cunning in his youth, so unsuspicious in his dotage, drew, as they had anticipated, the sad inference that his beloved son had been torn to pieces by a wild beast. Long and deeply he lamented his loss, and unavailing was the consolation which his hypocritical sons attempted to offer. Gradually, however, he transferred his affections to Rachel's younger son, Benjamin, and the "dreamer" faded from the memory of the tribe of Jacob.

Most men advance by imperceptible gradations from boyhood to young manhood. Although he may have already passed his twentieth year, Joseph descended into the dry well near Dothan a boy. Shielded by a tender parental care, life had brought him little of experience, and hence little practical development. When he was drawn up, it was a man whom the Ishmaelites purchased. Into a few awful moments some of the bitterest experiences which come to mortals had been compressed. False opinions of his own importance were scattered to the winds, and he at last recognized that, if he was to win a place among his fellows, it must be by his own faithfulness and efforts. The land of Egypt, whither he was carried, brought to him temptations, trials, and opportunities. Amidst them all,

the simple, strong sense of duty, the firm faith in Jehovah, and the exalted ideal which characterized the boy, upheld and guided the man. In his harsh contact with the world he soon gained a true perspective of life. Men with such a character as he possessed are always in demand. It was but natural that when a great need arose in Egypt for a leader and organizer, whose honesty and fidelity no one could question, he was the man selected. Thus the misunderstood and much-wronged shepherd boy, who nevertheless kept his ideals unsullied and who remained loyal to his conscience and his God, became the savior and virtual ruler of proud Egypt. To this was added the crowning glory of delivering his kinsmen and clan, and of raising them to positions of honor and wealth. The ambitions of the youthful dreamer were more than realized. The brothers, who had wronged him so deeply, bowed before him, not under the pressure of force or by virtue of power which a partial father had conferred upon him, but because of the exalted service which he was able to perform for them and theirs. The story, and the characters which it presents are as simple and attractive as the age to which they belong; but the principles which they so graphically illustrate are as true in their application to the complicated life of today as to that of the far-distant past. Should perchance the historical study of the biblical narratives which gather about the name of Joseph demonstrate that they represent the form in which later generations preserved their primitive race traditions, Joseph will continue to live in the literature and memory of the Christian, Jewish, and Mohammedan world, and to give help and suggestion to the boys who, amidst temptations and adverse circumstances, are striving to develop strong, noble, and useful characters.